

BYRNE IN LOVE

**FOR TALKING HEADS,
AMERICA'S MOST
INFLUENTIAL ROCK BAND,
HAPPINESS IS A
HIT ALBUM**

BY CHRISTOPHER CONNELLY

David Byrne? Uh, lemme think . . . Talking Heads? Yeah, yeah, I know: "This ain't no party," right? "Psycho Killer"? Yeah, *that* guy. I know who you mean. He's a little . . . weird, isn't he? Sorta not playing with a full deck, if you get my drift. Or the deck he's playing with has, like, the Ace of Cups in it or something. Kinda looped, a little on the psychotic side, am I right? Yeah, Talking Heads...great band, saw 'em live once, terrific. Don't sell many records, though, do they? Too

had. Boy, that Byrne sure is weird, you know what I mean? Is he normal, or what?

RIGHT NOW, DAVID BYRNE IS TRYING VERY hard not to lose his cool. It is a blustery, brain-frying hot July day, and Talking Heads are on a New York City dock feverishly conducting their last rehearsal before hitting the road for a six-week tour to promote their new album, *Speaking in Tongues*. Things are not going well.

Sure, it sounds pretty good, even with the piss-poor acoustics of the dilapidated dockside building where they're playing. The newly refurbished band—original members Byrne, Chris Frantz (drums), Tina Weymouth (bass, synthesizer) and Jerry Harrison (guitar, keyboards) and hired players Alex Weir (guitar), Steve Scales (percussion), Bernie Worrell (keyboards) and singers Ednah Holt and Lynn Mabry—pumps out the songs with righteous fervor. And Byrne goes into the act that has spurred so many ruminations on his state of mind. He skulks his vocals, thrashes his body from side to side, all with a Buster Keaton deadpan.

It's all for naught, though. See, Byrne doesn't just want to hit the road with a standard rock & roll show; he wants to do something really different. And that's what's screwing up and testing his mental stability right now. All the band's equipment is brought onstage during the course of the show instead of being set up ahead of time. And he's got codices of clever technical effects planned, from spotlights wheeled onstage to random words projected on screens behind the band. All ambitious, and all a hopeless mess at the moment.

"Holy shit, what the fuck's going on?" Byrne snaps at one black-faced lighting assistant. He leaps offstage and into intense conversation with the befuddled wackos. Even his parents—genial, ruddy-faced Scots from Baltimore, who've driven up for the day in their Honda Civic (complete with United Farm Workers bumper stickers)—look fretful.

A break is called. A young, attractive woman with a crisp haircut and a warm smile sidles up to Byrne and takes his hand. She is his long-gestating, cubin him down. When the rehearsal starts again, the screw-ups just keep coming—but Byrne is unusually serene. Before long, he's standing onstage next to a floor lamp that looks as if it's fresh from a Sears catalog. As he begins "This Must Be the Place (Naiive Melody)," he sings in a fragile, tender voice, minus his legendary whoops-a-daises. And he stares straight ahead at the woman with the warm smile:

Home is where I want to be
Pick me up and meet me round
I feel numb—born with a weak heart
So I guess I must be having fun....

The woman with the warm smile watches him closely, with great affection. His parents merely go down to work on one of his costumes. David Byrne, it seems, is no longer rock & roll's highest-strung hero. David Byrne is happy. David Byrne is in love. That night, David?

"Uh, yeah," he assents, before tacking on a typical addendum. "And the band is still going. We're somewhat successful."

SOMEWHAT, AMERICA, IS IT SOMETHING THEY said? For eight years, ever since they organized as a three-piece in New York City and brought their six months-in-rehearsal act to CBGB's, Talking Heads have composed and played the era's most consistently challenging and exciting music. If the essence of rock & roll is white kids trying to be as cool as black kids, then Talking Heads effected the most rarefied cultural synthesis of the Seventies, a fusion of git-down street rhythms and collegiate sensibilities heady enough to spawn a generation of imitators on both sides of the Atlantic.

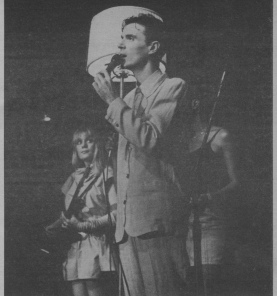
Like their class of '77 mates—Blondie, Television, the Pat Smith Group, the Ramones—the Heads culled at least part of their aesthetic from punk: the hands-on spirit that dethroned the overblown, corpse-rock abode in the mid-Seventies and declared anyone could play rock & roll if what he had to say was important enough. But awash in this atmosphere of deliciously anarchic creative freedom, Talking Heads remained somewhat aloof. From the outset, there was an asceticism about the band that distinguished them amid the irretrievable chaos.

That asceticism showed itself in the lean, supple quality of their music: Weymouth's clean, limber bass lines bouncing off her husband Frantz' rock-steady slamming; Byrne dodging in and out of the rhythm's firmness, plucking on punchy dance tracks like their "Arries!" before wheeling into standards like "96 Tears" or "1, 2, 3, Red Light." It showed in their no-frills attitude toward touring. "We all wanted not to spend excessive amounts of money to try and make things work," recalls Harvard-educated Jerry Harrison, a former member of the Modern Lovers who joined the Heads a few months before they recorded their first album, *Talking Heads 77*. "Tina had been the road manager, and then I was for a while. We only had a two-man crew, and we drove around in a station wagon. I always felt that the Modern Lovers' problems were half 'who's going to do the dishes?' and stuff. One thing about this band, everyone was more likely to do the dishes."

Above all, that asceticism—sort of a go-for-it minimalism—was most evident in the compositions and stage persona of David Byrne. Unlike the lit-drenched, punch-drunk verbiage of a Dylan or Springsteen, Byrne's lyrics were as terse as mathematical formulas. He took cultural clichés—on everything from true love to civic pride—out of their customary contexts and stitched them intoed into Pinteresque pastiches, whose odd juxtapositions and things left unsaid were rich with wit and insight.

Yet, it's through Byrne's ascetic grimelessness tended to obscure the deft satire of a song like "Uh-oh, Love Comes to Town": "I've been to college, I've been to school, I'm not the people that you read about in books." Or the anti-bacchic touches of "The Big Country," in which Byrne surveys a suburban landscape from an airplane—"A baseball diamond, now weather down there"—before tenderly declaring, "I wouldn't live there if you paid me 'n'."

The group's first producer, Tony Bongiovi, stupidly tried to smooth over the group's idiosyncrasies on *Talking Heads 77*. But once the band put art-rock honcho Brian Eno behind the board, there was no stopping them: *More*



TINA WEYMOUTH WATCHES BYRNE SING ONSTAGE IN LOS ANGELES.

Songs about Buildings and Food, on which Byrne began a song titled "Thank You for Sending Me an Angel" with the cry, "Oh, oh baby, you can walk, you can talk just like me!" the brilliant "Mind" / "Paper" / "Cities" aural triptych of *Fear of Music*; *Remain in Light*'s explosion into metafunk, as the Heads swelled to eleven members onstage and their sound took on a new polyrhythmic density; *Tenacious*, influential albums, all of them. Remarkable commercial disappointments, all of them. Even a two-record live set, virtually a greatest-hits collection from their outstanding concerns, sank.

It's not as if they've got a lot of cards left to play. Talking Heads have offered a novelty-style single ("Psycho Killer"), a soulful cover (Al Green's "Tale Me to the River") and a rock & roll anthem ("This ain't no party" track, "Life during Wartime"). What else could they offer?

Would you believe happiness? *Speaking in Tongues* is the cheekiest record that Talking Heads have yet made, an accessible, upbeat collection that showcases Byrne and the band at their best. "This record was made with a very kindly attitude," says Weymouth. "If it is a success, it would be nice to know that people like you because you have a positive attitude."

"David's always been careful, cautious, studied. I think he's trying to be open and trusting. And it would be a shame if people weren't trusting back. Trust him enough to think that it's all done in good faith, with a good heart—and not meant to be oblique."

THIRTY-ONE-YEAR-OLD DAVID BYRNE LIVES in a spacious Manhattan loft on the north end of SoHo, the trendy artists' neighborhood just south of Greenwich Village. The loft is neither a testament to icy minimalism nor an Arthur Bremer-style pigsty: a jumble of eccen-

tric-staple pieces fit together to form a desk in the living-room area, where a bass guitar and a large tape deck take up a sizable corner. A video hookup, complete with VCR and cable, occupies the room's other side; Byrne is likely to be the only rock star with Robert Wilson's *Ensemble on the Beach* ready for home viewing. And the albums could not be more eclectic; I spot everything from *Patty Cline's Greatest Hits* to *Janezco Cost Gomez* strewn across the floor as Byrne settles me into a chair at what passes for a breakfast table. The whole place is in amiable, nonanarchic dishevelment, including the loosely clothed owner, who excuses himself early in our conversation to shave. Pretty open for a man who used to wrap wire over his windows.

Byrne, as it turns out, is a product of the American Dream, the only son (he has a younger sister) of immigrant parents who settled in Baltimore after David was born. Unlike his Talking Heads confidants, who come from well-to-do backgrounds, Byrne says his spawning ground was "a lower-middle-class area, although the high school was probably upper lower class." His father, an electronics engineer recently retired from Westinghouse, instilled a love of science into David, who still peruses technical books to poetry or fiction.

Byrne describes his childhood during the Sixties as relatively uneventful. "People's attitudes were changing pretty quickly every couple of years. I think every few years I gravitated to a different group of people." He went to a few antour rallies, "but they weren't very exciting. At one, the National Guard came in and was shooting tear gas. And the kids would throw tear gas back. I thought that was kind of neat, but that's about all." He laughs scornfully easily; then resumes flitting with a tumbler of fruit juice.

BYRNE HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN ANOMALOUS ROCK & ROLL FIGURE, A RETICENT, ACADEMICALLY INCLINED SOUL.

In junior high, Byrne picked up a guitar for the first time and soon thereafter formed a band, Revelation. "I think we did a couple of Beatles songs, Rolling Stones songs, 'You Really Got Me,' stuff like that." When Revelation broke up, Byrne headed for the college coffeehouse circuit, where no one mistook him for the earnest folkie type. "I tended to play mostly rock songs," he says with a chuckle. And not for David the standard Martin steel-string, he'd just as soon knock out "Summertime Blues" on his ukulele. "I was really pretty quiet political stuff. It was kind of an odd act. I wouldn't be his last."

Sell the science buff—and already doing some double-track recording, thanks to some of Dad's electronic wizardry—Byrne toyed with the prospect of vocational school before enrolling at the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design. "The graffiti at RISD looked the best," he jokes. "It looked like it had the most interesting people there. So I thought, even if I don't like the subject, I don't want to hang around with a bunch of deadbeats for four years."

Maybe so, but RISD proved to be too rich a repeat for Byrne. He cut his hair short, "because I was kind of long hair. When I got to college, I thought I was pretty hip, but everyone who looked at me thought I was a real square." The problem was more than scalp-deep, though, and Byrne knew it. "I met lots of people whose backgrounds were very different from my own. Rich kids. They were brought up with a very different sensibility. Part of it was coming out of the States—one was brought up with the attitude that it was more noble to be poor. And so I kind of fell for that as well."

For what appears to have been the only time in his life, David Byrne couldn't quite handle a new environment. He dropped out of RISD within a year, returned to Baltimore for another year of art schooling and then quickly abandoned the country for a while. But by 1974, Byrne found himself back in Providence and started giving live performances.

Like much of his later work with Talking Heads, Byrne's pieces were quirky, hugely funny items. On a jaunt to New York, he shaved off his beard onstage at the Mercer Arts Center while a cohort played "Pennies from Heaven" on an accordion. He passed out UFO questionnaires to befuddled cafe patrons. Best of all, he transcribed TV quiz shows and gave dramatic readings from them in coffeehouses.

"The Price Is Right," he recalls with a grin. "Come on down! I thought it was poetry, in a way."

Yes, but did anyone get it? "Some people. A lot of people just thought I was a UFO nut."

I was wearing turquoise gloves a lot." Then, a telling statement: "I think part of it was seeing it with a certain detachment."

A few months later, Byrne hooked up with RISD painting student Chris Frantz, and the pair formed the Artistics, a five-man outfit whose catenailing performances soon had audiences calling them the Autistics. The band played around to good response, but graduation scattered its members. Frantz and Byrne felt they were on to something, though, and when a somewhat hesitant Byrne was persuaded to teach Frantz's girlfriend, fellow RISD student Martina Weymouth, how to play bass, Talking Heads (the name was picked out of a TV Guide article) was born.

Byrne recalls the band's first shows at CBGBs with special fondness ("There might have been twenty people in there, but they really seemed to appreciate what we were doing"). He also realizes that those performances left people wondering if he had lost all his marbles. "I've seen some of the early shows on videotape, and they are a little disturbing," Byrne admits. "But there was still some humor there. I did understand that the performances were a little odd, and that people carried that over and thought I was a little odd. But I thought it was a failing of mine that that wasn't clear enough, that some parts were meant to be funny."

The somber-squid tag has proved hard to shake, perhaps because Byrne has always been an anomalous rock & roll figure, a reticent, academically inclined soul who seems more at home with the wine-and-chesse postmodernists than with the boogie-thillie-yuppie brigade. When Byrne's production of the fun-loving, 1952-*Moscow* symphony, critics blamed Byrne for weighing down the *BS*' career attitude with his bookish seriousness. That same year, 1982, Byrne readily admitted that he was plucking his rhythms for *The Catherine Wheel*, a score for a dance by Twyla Tharp, out of John Chernoff's tome on African tribal music. Even the optimism of some of his lyrics—"There is nothing that is stronger than the feeling that you get/When your eyes are wide open..."—We come a long long distance and we're never going back/God my eyes wide open"—didn't mitigate matters.

Few audiences, therefore, were prepared for the verve of the band's 1982 tour. Byrne had always been a galvanizing live performer, but his snake-bitten, loose-as-a-goose dancing left his hip fans speechless. "I felt like I couldn't help but move," Byrne says. "When the band was really cooking, it tended to make one transcend oneself." Which was what Byrne did by galloping full tilt around the stage at the end of "Life during Wartime,"

then high-stepping out for the "Take Me to the River" encore like an R. Crumb character. But Spawning in Times reveals yet another new facet of Byrne's personality. "Love me till my heart stops?" "Love me till I die?" This doesn't sound like the man who sang on his second record, "Somebody, I believe, we can live in a world without love." What has love done for David Byrne?

"Uh, much more relaxed, I guess."

"IT SHOWS ALL OVER," SAYS TINA WEYMOUTH, digging into a sushiness dinner at a Japanese restaurant. "He's starting to take more pleasure in things. Take a little time to relax and sell jokes. Yeah, I think he's in love." "Her name's Bonnie Lutz," explains Frantz, spearing a slice of steak. "Quite a beauty, too, besides being smart and everything. I think her mother was Japanese and her father was American, of German extraction. She's a fashion model..."

And a designer, "chimes in Weymouth. "She knows all about the restaurant business." They laugh together. "She's a girl for all seasons!"

Weymouth and Frantz are from military families, and while Chris remained rooted in the U.S., Tina hopped around the globe: "Hawaii, Iceland, France, Belgium, Switzerland and mostly the East and West Coasts. Our family was too large, so we didn't get to go to really exotic places often." From the beginning of Talking Heads, the pair have been staunch supporters of Byrne's talent while frequently questioning his academic approach to rock & roll.

Those differences came to a well-publicized head in 1981 on the *Roman in Light* British tour. Byrne and Eno had virtually commandeered the studio side of the band, and the exclusivity of their relationship was beginning to irk the rest of the band. At one point, Weymouth muttered her disagreement to a reporter from the British magazine *The Face*. "They're like two fourteen-year-old boys making an impression on each other," she gumbled. "By the time they finished working together for three months, they were dressing like one another... I can see them when they're eighty years old and all alone. There'll be David Bowie, and Syd Byrne and Brian Eno, and they'll just talk to each other."

"I was just feeling left out, I guess," Weymouth says today, laughing. "We felt like we had this mission," Byrne recalls sheepishly. "It was a little bit silly." But 1981 became the band's tenet year as Byrne enveloped himself in outside projects: *The Catherine Wheel*, the 1982-21 album with Brian Eno titled *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. Breakup rumors were rife.

The problem, they agree, wasn't the high-voltage fights endemic to the rock & roll scene. It was more a lack of communication. Head members moved away from one another and didn't talk to one another except to conduct business. "And that was what we were accustomed to," recalls Weymouth. "We had always been so close before that." The group's prep work was finally creating a price.

And then, in 1982, Weymouth, there was another source of friction—was drugs. Some members of the group were doing cocaine or something. Nobody does anymore. You wouldn't buy it yourself, but someone would

offer it to you. And I think that was really bad, because when you misinterpret and misunderstand what someone else is saying, it makes you paranoid. That had more to do with it than a lot of things."

(Was there a drug problem in Talking Heads? "I think we had a tendency to talk about a problem before it was there," says Jerry Harrison. "Maybe there was a problem, but not that I know of," says Byrne. "I kind of stayed pretty much out of other people's... whatever they do when they party.")

But the basic reason for the band's growing estrangement was, Weymouth maintains, simple insecurity. "If David becomes so important, if it takes David away from the group and breaks up the group—what will happen to us? Will the businessmen who run record companies give us a job? Will our friendships be busted up?"

To fend off these desperate thoughts, Weymouth and Frantz, with the encouragement of Talking Heads manager Gary Koster and Island Records president Chris Blackwell, decided to try an outside project of their own. What they came up with was Tom Tom Club, a zany, loose-limbed aggregation of Weymouth's sisters and some Jamaican pals who put out a record in late 1981. It was, says Frantz, "one of the sillier records of a silly time in musical history." Ironically echoing the academic-style approach to music that Weymouth and Frantz had taken over Talking Heads, the record sold an astonishing 600,000 copies, almost twice as many as any previous Heads record.

"It was a really pleasant surprise, let's put it that way," says Frantz. "We didn't expect it, but we certainly felt like we'd paid enough dues. Not a lifetime of experience in music, but half a lifetime."

Tom Tom Club's success seems to have neutralized the balance of power within the group. By the time the band came together to choose tracks for a live album, *The Name of This Band Is Talking Heads*, spirits were high. "There had been a tendency to think that the new stuff was just so much better than anything else," says Jerry Harrison, who issued a well-received solo LP of his own, *The Red and the Black*. "When we went back to listen to the old live tapes, we'd hear things that were something that was really great, too."

In 1982, Weymouth and Frantz embarked on another solo project: their first child, Robert Weymouth Frantz, frequently addressed as Robin, was born three weeks prematurely in November, but at nine months of age, he boasts a shock of auburn hair, more chins than the Hong Kong phone book and two delighted parents. "We're always surprised," says Weymouth, who nurses the baby in between sets on the tour.

"David's so funny," says Frantz. "He sort of wants to hold the baby, but he'll never say, 'Can I hold the baby?' We just say, 'David, would you like to hold the baby?' And David gets all stiff, like, 'Am I doing it right? He's just holding the baby out like this, you know?' Frantz imitates a man holding a soon-to-explode mortar shell.

"Well, Chris," admonishes Weymouth, "it wasn't so long ago that you were..."

"True, true," admits Frantz. "I was a little awkward the first time I held him, too."

"Took a little getting used to."



THE HEADS (FROM LEFT): WORRELL, FRANTZ, HOLT, BYRNE, HARRISON, MABRY, SCALES, WEYMOUTH, WEIR

"Yeah." They smile at each other. Nice. "A lot of people said it would never work," says Frantz of his and Weymouth's marriage. "Especially other musicians. Lenny Kaye, for example, a good friend of ours, said, 'I don't know how you guys have lasted so long.' This was before we were married. Somehow, we lacked out. It works for us."

"Because we're not exactly alike, I think," says Weymouth. "He can do things I can't." "Something, we cover for each other," Frantz adds.

"Love will do anybody good," Weymouth says. "I'm in love with my son. That's kind of a love affair, too. It can be anything, but it's nice when it's someone of the opposite sex."

"HE HAS GONE THROUGH A LOT OF GIRLFRIENDS," says a pal of Byrne's (not a band member) who chose to remain anonymous. "But Bonnie's the first real one. He lets her into his life; there's nothing uncomfortable between them. It's really love."

When it comes to relationships with the opposite sex—and talking about them in public—no one is going to confuse David Byrne with Rick James. He chooses his words with great care and seems vaguely uncomfortable.

"I'd met Bonnie once before at a performance," Byrne begins. "Her sister and

brother-in-law produced the Peking Opera, and I sort of met her again in Tokyo." They "pretty much" hit it off immediately and corresponded by mail for "about a year. It might keep a relationship going, that you don't see each other every minute of the day; I'm amazed that Chris and Tina can survive that." Bonnie moved to New York a few months ago, "but she's probably going back to Tokyo to work."

How does that make him feel? "I feel it was inevitable," he says, shrugging. "It's not so bad."

Not so bad? That sounds like the old David Byrne, the one who used to be so obsessed with his work.

"Well, I sell an, though. I still get totally wrapped up in whatever project I'm in, whether it's making a video or planning a tour. It's pretty much all-consuming, which is not very good for someone else to be hanging around, because she tends to get ignored or overlooked. And I think that I've accepted that that's the way I am."

What is it, then, that he wants out of a relationship?

"I don't know," he says quietly. "I haven't been able to answer that question myself. I think it's something animal."

What about marriage? Or children?

"I don't know." At last, he laughs again. "Everyone seems to be doing it these days—I don't want to be uncool and not have a baby! But it does seem like something that just overtakes one. At some point, people decide this is the thing to do, get the urge to raise another person. I haven't quite struck me that strongly yet. So I figure I'll wait until it does." He pauses. "I gotta pee."

THE FIRST FEW DATES ON THE TALKING HEADS tour went about as well as that last dress rehearsal. The production manager quit during the second week. In Montreal, the Police, who were headlining, wouldn't let the Heads use their video system to broadcast to the 35,000 in attendance. Their declaration so incensed Byrne that he lifted one of the expensive cameras out of its slot and, according to the Police, broke it.

On the most significant tour the band had ever attempted, the situation was grim. So Byrne turned to Bonnie Lutz. "He was in trouble, so he called her up," says Byrne's friend.

By the time the tour hit New York's Forest Hills Stadium in late August, *Speaking in Tongues* was already the biggest-selling Talking Heads record ever, "Burning Down the House" was an MTV staple, and even Tom

Tom Club was bagging great reviews for its second album, *Close to the Bone*. While perhaps not as mind boggling as last year's legendary gig at the same site, the show was thrilling and technically flawless. Two hours and ten minutes after Byrne began playing a solo version of "Psycho Killer," the nine-member band closed with a reprise of "Burning Down the House" and left about 6000 sweaty, cheering fans. Backstage, you couldn't wipe the smile off Byrne's face with a squeaker. He was in love. He was successful.

"Everyone's happy that he's happy," says Weymouth. "He was always afraid of becoming an ordinary person. And I think he wanted to be unique and individual. So to do that, he would do sort of wacked-out things instead of slipping into the mainstream. Which is kind of painful for a shy person—sort of brave, and a little bit crazy, too."

"But he did it, and he's laughing last."

TALKING HEADS? YEAH, GREAT BAND, SAW that video on MTV. Funny bunch, you know what I mean? That David Byrne is a character, right? Not really... I mean the guy is a real. Like that song about moon rocks? That's funny stuff. Yeah, what a great show. You know, he looked like he was really having fun up there. Am I right, or what?